

Favela Chic: Consuming the Poor Through Cinema and Tourism

Research Thesis

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by

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***Favela Chic:****Consuming the Poor Through Cinema and Tourism*

One of the most powerful capabilities of a human being is the ability to consume (metaphorically) another of its own kind. Throughout time people have discovered ways of capitalizing on marginalized groups of the human race. The gaze, once only a mechanism of the *biological eye*, was transformed by photographic and cinematic practices through the invention of the camera lens. Whereas before, objects and people were simple realities, defined by their innate existence in space, the camera provided a means of capturing them. The ability to freeze a moment in time, or isolate wholes into individual pieces, has lent itself to the sensationalized, re-definition of “reality.” When a photographer zooms in to take a picture, some of the context is lost. Thus, complicated realities are watered down into unrecognizable simulations. This same idea can be appropriated into the act of filmmaking, both narrative and documentary. When a documentary filmmaker ventures into an unfamiliar world, in order to capture a reality, what pieces of this individual’s context is lost?

The Hollywood film industry, established in the United States, operates on a mode of filmmaking that creates hyper-produced films aimed toward viewer entertainment. These productions, using the continuity editing system, present seamless narratives, which are easy for audiences to engage with. Ultimately, the Hollywood industry works to generate revenue. In contrast to this profit-focused industry, several Brazilian filmmakers/theorists, like Glauber Rocha and Nelson Pereira dos Santos, through the Cinema Nova movement, sought to create films that represented Brazil, and the people on the margins of the country for other reasons. Lisa Shaw and Stephanie Dennison state in, “The Nation in Contemporary Cinema,” that:

“The *sertão* (arid hinterland of Brazil’s North-East) and the *favela* (urban slum) were the settings of landmark films made in Brazil in the 1950s and early 1960s, such as *Rio, 40 graus* (*Rio, 40 Degrees*, 1955), *Rio, Zona Norte* (*Rio, Northern Zone*, 1957) and *Vidas secas* (*Barren Lives*, 1963), all directed by Nelson Pereira dos Santos, *Deus e o diabo na terra do sol* (*Black God, White Devil*, Glauber Rocha, 1964) and *A grande cidade* (*The Big City*, Carlos Diegues, 1966).”<sup>1</sup>

These films, as well as several others, promoted a cinema that worked against the dominating current of the glossy films produced in Hollywood, and encouraged more authentic and evocative narratives for the people of Brazil. Instead of “cultivating a taste” for the misery of the impoverished Latin American, as Rocha states, Cinema Novo expressed this misery as blunt violence which the “colonizer” could not ignore, but was forced to recognize. Through doing this the filmmakers felt that the *truth* of Brazil was revealed, and a foundation for the possibility of change was established.

While creating a platform for the representation of the “other” suggests a move toward a more meaningful Brazilian cinema, the power that the camera lens has to frame, imprison, and define the “other” can often times cause damage to the “reality” of the *favelados*, and the other citizens living outside of the bourgeoisie and elite society. When an “average” film viewer watches a production like *Cidade de Deus* (*City of God*, Fernando Meirelles, 2002), the reality of the *favelas* seems to be simplified into drug trafficking, sex, and violence. Of course, beneath the surface, more is going on in this film, but the spectacle-driven images that permeate the minds of American audiences, and other foreign viewers (possibly even a Brazilian viewer with a narrow knowledge bank of Brazilian cinema history) come to define a complex reality. Rather

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<sup>1</sup> Shaw, Lisa, and Stephanie Dennison. "The Nation In Contemporary Cinema ." *Brazilian National Cinema*. London: Routledge, 2007. 101-114. Print.

than these films existing as informative bodies of work that prompt meaningful discussion and promote change, they produce complacent viewers, and aid in the development of a systematic process where dehumanization, and strategic voyeurism encourage the rational consumption of those believed to be at the bottom of the human hierarchy.

Taking the idea of the power of the camera lens further, we could say that its ability to assemble realities and invite people into these subjective, and constructed edifices of ethnic cultures, results in creating false senses of *familiarity*, and a *desire* to experience what is seen, first hand. This is especially true with recent US made documentary cinema, which introduces foreign audiences to *favelados*, and reminds the viewers that *human beings* are the inhabitants of these media-subjugated environments. Once some sense of reality sets in, the viewer realizes the tangible proximity of the *favela*, and endeavors to *experience* what they have consumed from a distance. This leads to *favela* tourism, thus leading to the “gazing” at of the “other.” Whether this objectification was the intention of the filmmaker, the “gazing” that is developed through the act of touring becomes the dominant factor in digesting what is seen. This “gaze,” alone cannot create change, but turns what is seen, which is the reality of the favelados, into a spectacle to be consumed.

By positioning the cinematic *favela* as the foundation for Brazilian favela tourism, and juxtaposing tourism with ethnographic/anthropological modes of documentary, this analysis will work to legitimize ideas of informing and diversifying the human landscape of knowledge and experience. It will also question the present modes of documentary and tourism, which often result in problematic representations of the marginalized cultures of the world. By recognizing the necessity of *some* form of representation, ideas rooted in basic ethics will negotiate with the exploitative nature of the filmic medium. Ultimately, a paradigm will be presented which offers a

new model for furthering the discussion of cultural engagement and representation within the fields of tourism and cinema. This model will openly acknowledge the inherent faults that exist within making films about places of poverty, while questioning the production process, focalization, major themes, and targeted audiences of these several documentaries made by American- and British-based filmmakers.

### **The *Favela*: Living on the Hillsides of Rio de Janeiro**

*Favelas* (Figure 3) are informal communities, which mostly exist on the outskirts and hillsides of major Brazilian cities. For example, Rio de Janeiro is home to Rocinha, one of the largest *favelas* in South America. “Social Science Representations of Favelas in Rio de Janeiro: A Historical Perspective,” written by Licia Valladares, is a paper that addresses the historical standpoint of the *favela*, and the historical evolution of the word itself. Valladares states:



Figure 3. Chensiyuan, Inside Rocinha Favela, April 11, 2011 via Wikipedia,

There from designating a specific place, favela became eventually the general denomination of an urban phenomenon typical of Rio's development from the 1920s on, whereby settlers built precarious homes in land they did not own. By the 1950s it was extended to a national category used by the Brazilian census, and from the 1960s on it entered the terminology of the social sciences.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Valladares, Licia. "Social Science Representations of Favelas in Rio de Janeiro: A Historical Perspective." *Lanic Etext Collection* (2006): 2. Print.

These informal settlements are recognized as being separate from the idea of the “slum,” and were built by their own inhabitants. To this day, the infrastructure of many *favelas* remains the responsibility of the communities that live in them. This means that clean water is not readily available, and electric lines are often times shared by several homes. Because of the infrastructural and economical realities of these communities, some of the present-day inhabitants, who will be referred to as *favelados*, participate in illegal drug trafficking to make ends meet. Those who participate in the illegal drug trade, though sizeable in number, do not represent the mass majority of *favelados*, despite the fact that the media, including the cinema, tends to characterize the *favela* to be largely represented by this subset of the population. *The Rio Times* reported that:

...there are 1,393,314 people in 763 *favelas* in Rio, ahead of Sao Paulo, whose population in favelas is listed at 1,280,400. Perhaps the most striking insight when compared with 2000 Census figures from the IBGE (when there were 1,092,283 residents of favelas in Rio, or 18.65 percent of the inhabitants), representing a growth of favela population of 27.65 percent in ten years [sic]. That is in stark contrast to the growth of population in the rest of the city, which has increased only 3.4 percent, from 4,765,621 to 4,929,723 in ten years, eight times slower.<sup>3</sup>

This article demonstrates the sheer massiveness of a *favela* population, who is neglected by their government, and simplified into a problematic and arduous section of Brazilian society. When looking at Rio de Janeiro, it is evident that rather than dealing with the reality of the proximity of

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<sup>3</sup> Hurrell, Fiona. "Rio Favela Population Largest in Brazil: Daily." *The Rio Times*. Brazil News Agency, 23 Dec. 2011. Web. 15 Apr. 2014. <<http://riotimesonline.com/brazil-news/rio-politics/rios-favela-population-largest-in-brazil/>>.

the *favela* to the rest of the city, and the imperative role that the *favelas* play in the culture, image, and economy of the city, the government would rather stigmatize these eclectic environments, and ignore them as long as possible.<sup>4</sup>

With all of this being said, the *favelas* stand as an engaging figure to, not only the Brazilian context, but also the context of the entire world. *Favelas*, as well as other marginalized communities, like Indian slums, are fascinating in that they exist within a largely developed world, whose infrastructural, governmental, and educational systems are tens of years ahead of those within the spaces of these communities. Thus, it is easy to see the push toward using film to present these striking facts to self-satisfied viewers, sitting at home in front of their cable television, and Blu-ray players. Whether documentaries on the favelas are produced to generate discussion and change regarding the favelas, or they are created to exist within the simple world of exploitative cinema (which fuels the “gaze”), one must recognize the fact that film-viewing is enormously subjective. This means that, regardless of the intention of a filmmaker, their goal can become lost in translation, and misinterpreted by the audiences who view their pieces.

### **The *Favela* as Documentary**

The documentary film form exists as a medium that can be simply understood as working to present a “reality” to viewers, many of whom are willing to accept the material presented without question. Bill Nichols states in, *Representing Reality*:

Documentary as a concept or practice occupies no fixed territory. It mobilizes no finite inventory of techniques, addresses no set number of issues, and adopts no

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<sup>4</sup> The discussion of the place of the favela becomes very fascinating in the context of the upcoming mega events, such as the 2014 World Cup, taking place in Rio de Janeiro.

completely known taxonomy of forms, styles, or modes. The term *documentary* must itself be constructed in much the same manner as the world we know and share. Documentary film practice is the site of contestation and change. Of greater importance than the ontological finality of a definition—how well it captures the “thingness” of the documentary—is the purpose to which a definition is put and the facility with which it locates and addresses important questions, those that remain unsettled from the past and those posed by the present.<sup>5</sup>

With this quote, Nichols recognizes the fact that the documentary film form cannot be concretely defined. There is not a formulaic standard to creating documentary film, like there is in the Hollywood film industry production process (though it is often defied). This is due to the fact that, like the world itself, documentary filmmaking is always changing. Nichols presents to readers, in this same text, four (of his six) modes of documentary filmmaking: Expository, Observational, Interactive and Reflexive. Each mode operates to emphasize different aspects of the real world, though they all work to present what the filmmaker understands as “truth.” The danger of documentary filmmaking lies in the power that the filmmaker holds in presenting this “truth,” which often time works to represent the “other.” In doing this, he may over simplify a complex reality, or edit a multifaceted individual into a closed minded monster.

Documentaries go one step further than narrative (fiction) productions in their presentation of impoverished environments and their inhabitants. They do not only work to expose an area of the world, largely ignored by the greater of society, but also do so by implying that there is “truth” in what they produce. Though this adds an extra layer of difficulty to the

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<sup>5</sup> Nichols, Bill. "The Domain of Documentary." *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991. 12. Print.



documentary film medium, documentary film also has the ability to educate the world, and expose the greatness within the margins of society.

In creating documentaries there are several principles that can be followed to avoid exploitation and achieve in creating a positive image of whatever is being explored:

1.        Attempting to remain transparent: Documentary films should not be glossy, hyper-produced productions, but should rather, emphasize the idea that the camera is present, and someone is operating it. Through this transparency viewers are reminded that they are watching a man made production, that may, or may not, represent the truth of who/what is being presented.
2.        Not claiming objectivity: There will always exist opinions that contrast those of the filmmaker. Documentaries should not operate by forcing the idea of objectivity, but should make clear the fact that the ideas emphasized are that of an individual, the director, who chooses where to point the camera, and edits out what he does not feel should stay.
3.        Allowing the subjects to express and represent themselves, as well as play a sizeable role in the post-production of the film produced: When creating a documentary about people, these people should have the dominant voice. Strategies like the “voice-of-God” gives the strongest opinion to the narrator, and *creates* the reality of the “other,” rather than presenting their reality. Though the filmmaker cannot always include the subjects of his documentary in the post-production process, he *can* operate by keeping his intentions clear, and presenting the finished product to those involved.
4.        NOT operating for entertainment’s sake, but working to establish a foundation for change: In creating documentary films, the focus should be on

representation, not entertainment. A filmmaker must stay true to what is being communicated, rather than working for viewers and critics. In saying this, the artistic and entertainment qualities, which exist innately in filmmaking, do not have to be forgotten, but they should not overpower the message of the documentary.

5. Recognizing that subjectivity exists in everything: A filmmaker can go into a project with the best of intentions. He could follow every principle listed above, and more. This does not mean that the viewers will interpret what is presented exactly how the filmmaker wants them to interpret it. Subjectivity exists in everything, and a message or simple idea always has the ability to be lost in translation.

These five principles, though not the only ones possible, are important keys to creating documentary film, which works to expose and not to exploit. In following these ideas, not only is the filmmaker able to stay true to *himself* but, more importantly, he works to stay true to those who will be affected by his presentation of their “reality.”

In applying these principles to concrete bodies of work I am going to look at three documentary films focusing on the Brazilian favelas, *Dancing With the Devil* (Blair, 2009), *Rio Breaks* (Mitchell, 2009), and *Witness: Rio* (HBO, 2012). Two of these documentaries demonstrate the principles outlined above, and work to present productions that appear to be less exploitative. The last documentary, though it does present some of the non-exploitive principles, seems to operate in a way that does not work *with* the people of the favela.



*Dancing With the Devil*  
(Jon Blair, 2009)



*Rio Breaks*  
(Justin Mitchell, 2009)



*Witness: Rio*  
(HBO, 2012)

*Dancing With the Devil* is a documentary that follows the lives of three Brazilian men; two of which are *favelados*: Spiderman (drug lord) and Pastor Dione (ex-drug dealer) and one, a police officer, whose work is focused in the *favela*. *Rio Breaks* is a documentary that follows the lives of two young *favelados*, Fabio and Naama, who love to surf. Both of these documentaries demonstrate all five of the principles that aid in creating non-exploitative documentary, but two of the principles are emphasized throughout the productions, and exist as very powerful forces within both of the films.

First, there are several moments in both films where the director's (or another team member's) voice can be heard prompting a question. This strategy emphasizes the idea of remaining transparent, as it reminds the viewer that even though the camera seems to be a "fly-on-the-wall," and the subjects seem to be naturally existing in their environments, someone is present, and their presence influences the actions and words spoken by the film subjects. Secondly, there is the hand-held camera, which is used in both documentaries. By allowing the viewers to see the erratic movement of the camera, they are reminded, once again, of the presence of the camera and filmmaker, which are huge factors in what is being presented on the screen. Both of these principles work against the Hollywood idea of erasing the marks of production, in order to suck the viewers into the diegesis, and force them to forget that they are watching a movie.

*Witness: Rio* is a part of an episodic documentary series, which presents individuals who take their work into dangerous and adventurous environments. This description in itself offers the root of the issues that exist within this documentary. This particular episode of *Witness* journeys with Eros Hoagland, a photographer who takes his work into the *favelas* of Brazil. I

want to preface my issues with this production by expressing the fact that *Witness* does follow some of the principles of presenting non-exploitative documentary like, transparency. The hand-held camera present in the documentaries discussed previously is also present in this production, and it can remind a viewer that what is being presented was influenced by the presence of both. Another, interesting, layer of transparency also operates in this production. Throughout the entirety of the documentary there is never a push towards trying to exist as a documentary focusing on *anything* but Eros Hoagland. From the very beginning, viewers know what they are watching, and this is not the story of the *favelados*, but is the story of Eros Hoagland's journey through the *favelas* (which is a problem, since Eros Hoagland does not *have* to be in the *favela*, and since his journey within the *favela* is not more important than the reality of the *favelados*).

With all of this being said, *Witness: Rio* ventures into the *favela*, and presents the environment in a way that works against the *favelados*, rather than with them. The film opens with a short introduction of the conflict between the police forces and the drug dealers, and this becomes the image of the *favelas* for the entire duration of the documentary. Though the *favelados* are certainly not the focus of this production, they are affected by the repeated images presented of the *favela* and drugs, or the *favela* and guns. Not every *favelado* is a drug dealer, but this documentary waters down the diversity and complexity within these marginalized environments to a simple reality of violence, drugs and corruption.

### **From Virtual Tourism to *Favela* Tourism**

A large influence in societies attraction to film lies in its ability to provide viewers with accessible entertainment. There are thousands of movie theatres around the world that play the newest productions on a rolling schedule. Movie theatres provide audiences with not only the

production, but also the experience of the giant screen, and the ability to react with the rest of the viewing audience. Today, personal viewing is also a popular way to watch, and re-watch, films. This provides a new level of entertainment, where viewers can pause and rewind, while watching a movie in the comfort of their homes. In the context of documentary film, a wall exists between the viewer and the subjects of the production. If a viewer were watching *Witness: Rio* in the security of their living room, with the convenience of knowing they can *stop watching* at any given second, they would operate on a level of disconnectedness from the material that is being presented. There is an open understanding that this is not *their* reality, but the reality of an “other,” so a complacency becomes present in the act of viewing a film, one that inhibits a viewer from fully understanding the “aesthetic of hunger, introduced by Glauber Rocha.

What was outlined above is not the case for every viewer. There are some audience members that approach documentary film with intentions of gaining new understandings of people and places recognized as underrepresented or stigmatized. This is due to the subjective experience of that individual, an idea lightly explored in earlier sections of this piece. For viewers who operate to “gaze” at the harsh living conditions and adverse situations of the “other,” the documentary does not exist as a means of communication or education, but rather acts as a means of “virtual tourism.” In the comfort and safety of their home, the viewer has the ability to journey to the hills of Rio de Janeiro and (loosely) experience the “reality” of the *favelados*. For some, this is enough to feed the curiosity or desire for an adrenaline rush, but for others, this is just the root of *actual* tourism.

The idea of *favela* tourism has been around since the 1990s. Bianca Freire-Medeiros states in, “I Went to the City of God’: Gringos, Guns and the Touristic Favela,” “...I invite the reader on a tour through to Rocinha [largest favela in Brazil], where tourist activities have been

performed since the early 1990s with a significant increase after *City of God's* international release in early 2003.”<sup>6</sup> In saying this Freire-Medeiros recognizes the effect that film can have on the environment that it presents to viewers. As stated above, some viewers are content with the filmic experience presented by narrative cinema, and documentary film. Others reach further for the tangible experience of stepping foot into the environment that they witnessed on screen.

Freire-Medeiros states in an earlier part of her essay:

Through mobile technologies, which include both physical and virtual travels, the favela becomes capable of offering international visitors a most interesting package: controlled risk combined with a deep sense of adventure, the opportunity of acting as a concerned citizen (by supposedly contributing to the economic development of a poor area) and, no less important, a beautiful view of the city captured from above.<sup>7</sup>

This statement begs the question of whether or not favela tourism supports the *favela* and its inhabitants. There easily exist cases where the income produced by *favela* tours, simply, supports the operations of the business. Of course, there is the chance that a tourist will stop at a small vendor run by a *favelado* who welcomes outsiders into his environment, but does this benefit outweigh the price of the voyeuristic atmosphere that the act of touring a place of poverty produces? This is a difficult question, whose answer will change from person to person, and from decade to decade. Nonetheless, there are entrepreneurs who are setting out to, not only

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<sup>6</sup> Freire-Medeiros, Bianca. “I Went to the City of God’: Gringos, Guns and the Touristic Favela.” *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 20.1 (2011): 23. Print.

<sup>7</sup> Freire-Medeiros, Bianca. “I Went to the City of God’: Gringos, Guns and the Touristic Favela.” *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 20.1 (2011): 22. Print.

provide a simple answer to the question asked, but to build models for future generations, of what a *better favela* tourism can look like.

For example, Elliot Rosenberg, a graduate of the University of Virginia and the creator of Favela Experience, a company that connects travelers with residents of Rocinha (the largest favela in Rio de Janeiro) who rent out rooms in their homes. Through the website for this company you can select the host space that you desire to stay in and, through *airbnb*, can book your stay online. Instead of insisting on travelers staying outside of the *favela*, and then entering only during the tours, this company vies for a healthy interaction between *favelados* and curious travelers. The vision statement of Favela Experience states, “We seek a world in which tourism positively impacts developing communities and the environment.” The positivity that can root from an experience like the Favela Experience can happen on a large or small scale. Whether someone stays in the *favela* for one night to experience the breathtaking views, and witness the diversity the favela has to offer. Or someone books a four month stay in order to become aware of, and fully immersed in the vibrant cultures within the community, something *positive* is there to be gained.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the *favela*, as well as other areas of poverty, is often times presented as a product to be consumed through film and tourism. This does not mean that any aim towards shining light on this marginalized area of the world should be avoided. Rather, filmmakers and businessmen should operate on honest levels, and work to better the situations within these environments. There are several things that can be done to improve the representation of the *favelas* and *favelados* through film and tourism, but it should be understand that neither of these

mediums of communication will ever have the ability to present an “objective reality,” since subjectivity exists so powerfully in everything.

This thesis explores documentary films, which operate by providing basic narrative, but a production posted on Vimeo by the *Cria Foundation* sparked an idea that maybe non-narrative projects are the best way to showcase the beauties and complexities within an environment like the *favela*. Without a narrative, viewers are presented with snippets of a reality, and are not urged to digest and believe the argument of a director. Additionally, the idea of self-representation exists as a way to rid documentary film of the influence of filmmakers who implant themselves into an environment that they may not fully understand how to capture. However, Melanie Gilligan argues that self-representation can result in “escape through culture” which places a *favelado* outside of the *favela* and, ironically, results in his *gaining* by *selling* the “unlucky” people who could not escape the environment that once “trapped” him.<sup>8</sup> This further complicates the discussion of the representation of areas like the *favelas*. It is a discussion that will continue to emerge and shift, as the situation in Brazil changes. This discussion will become increasingly important as we approach the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympics, both hosted in Rio de Janeiro.

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<sup>8</sup> Gilligan, Melanie. "Slumploitation - The Favela on Film and TV." *Mute*. Mute, 5 Sept. 2006. Web. 22 Mar. 2014. <<http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/slumploitation-favela-film-and-tv>>.



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